

How gardeners grew a city of little Edens



Candida
Lycett Green

The London Town Garden 1700-1840

by Todd Longstaffe-Gowan

Yale University Press £30
☎ £27 (0870 165 0870)

Eminent garden historian and landscape gardener Todd Longstaffe-Gowan has an unrivalled knowledge of the London garden during its most formative period, the 18th and 19th Centuries, and has produced a beautifully illustrated and brilliant book.

London has almost always been in the vanguard of fashionable taste. In the 1700s the city expanded rapidly west and northward, not haphazardly as before, but in an increasingly planned way. This involved not only cramming in new terrace housing with small gardens, but also retaining open spaces such as the 'Fields' at Lincoln's Inn, Soho and Spittle, and Squares which were generally named after the great landowning developers - Grosvenor, Bedford and Portman, for instance.

Large spaces were also left for parks. This greened-up approach was not only intended to promote good health and greater safety after the Plague and the Fire of London in the 1600s, but also to



Capital prospect...
A 1721 painting by William Grimboldson showing the view from Hermes House in Canonbury, North London

An exhibition at the Museum of London based on the book *The London Town Garden* runs until April 30

of a horticultural style which ran parallel with changes among the fashionable elite, and indeed in public parks, with the coming of the Age of Romanticism. The rigid formalities of parterres were abandoned for a more naturalistic look. Alongside Longstaffe-Gowan's scholarly research are colourful descriptions of jobbing gardeners and journeymen whose apprentices earned as little as £5 a year and who were eventually driven out by grabbing nurserymen from Hoxton and Covent Garden.

By the beginning of the 19th Century, the nurserymen had begun to monopolise the garden contract business and, where necessary, were able to produce instant gardens which could be

also enlightened publicists such as J.C. Loudon who produced 'must-have' books on the town and suburban garden and, of course, the architect John Nash, who masterminded the Regent's Park area.

Things are no different today. There are still the same battles over style, the same property entrepreneurs and commercial nurserymen charging exorbitant prices for window boxes, but the town garden will always be a resort for personal enjoyment and expression and there will surely always be visionaries like the William Blakes. An account of the 1790s by Thomas Butts describes the Blakes in their 'little garden' in Lambeth sitting naked in their summerhouse.